

THE epicenter

Newsletter of the VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VAPAHCS) • August 2004



Proud of our Veterans,
Proud of America!

Peterson Returns from Iraq

Scott Peterson recently returned to his job as a VAPAHCS Police Officer after 14 months of combat duty in Iraq. This wasn't his first return. It wasn't even his second return. In fact, since 2001, Army Reservist Peterson has spent 27 months on active duty and prior to that served in Desert Storm.

"The Reserve and Guard have been critical players in Iraq," said Peterson. "And I'm not going to be a bit surprised if I get called up again. MPs are especially needed and there just aren't enough of us."



Peterson is a member of the 341st MP Company out of San Jose. A master sergeant, E-8, he has been in the reserves and on active duty a total of 18 years. During that time, he has served in Bosnia, South America (including during Operation

Master Sergeant Scott Peterson served 14 months in Iraq.

Just Cause in Panama), and throughout the Gulf region.

"I was stationed in Balad, just north of Baghdad, during this last assignment. My unit primarily served as convoy operation escorts, and frankly, we were lucky not to lose anyone in the unit. There were truck drivers who were killed. The days were long, sometimes 12-13 hours, and we worked seven days a week," said Peterson, who lives in Antioch.

Peterson has been a VA policeman since 1999. "Scott exemplifies the outstanding men and women we have serving our country in our military. We are all truly proud of his service to this nation and hope to keep him with us for a while this time," said Guy Reger, acting chief of the police service.

Peterson's wife, daughter, son and mother are even more hopeful. "This has been really tough on my mom," said Peterson. "She's definitely ready for me to get out of the Army. I think it's been harder on her than anyone. So, since I've been home, my focus has been to spend as much time as possible with my family."



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A Word From Our Director



**Elizabeth Joyce Freeman, Director
VA Palo Alto Health Care System**

Last month, the VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VAPAHCS) received very positive coverage in several print publications for the care we are providing to veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. This included an extensive cover story in the July 14 edition of the San Francisco Chronicle. Although the story highlighted the care we provide to traumatic brain-injured veterans, it is a testament to the outstanding care we

provide system-wide. We know this is true, because we regularly administer local and national surveys that show veterans' satisfaction is high.

Nancy Abney from Quality Management and many of our VAPAHCS volunteers and staff from Ambulatory, Acute and Extended Care all play a large role in this effort of measuring satisfaction and targeting areas for improvement through specific actions.

The areas we have targeted include:

Staff are courteous and respectful: Our veteran satisfaction rates are consistently above 90%!

Staff provide good information and education that includes understandable answers to health questions about medications – what they are for and the potential side effects. Patients know whom to call if problems or symptoms get worse. VAPAHCS patient satisfaction scores are trending upward with our focused effort to improve ways we communicate this information. Clinical pharmacists now provide interactive medication education to patients prior to discharge and written patient instruction sheets are provided with each medication. Acute medical and surgical patients discharged from the hospital are called by their Patient Care Coordinator at home. This provides an opportunity to reinforce discharge instructions and solve problems patients may have encountered in

their transition after a hospitalization. In ambulatory care, New Patient Orientation Clinics teach patients how to navigate our health care system to minimize confusion about how to re-fill prescriptions, use the Telephone Care Program, how to contact their provider and much more.

Coordination: how and when test results can be expected. Major improvements have been made in this regard with satisfaction scores rising significantly. VAPAHCS patients can now expect to be called by their provider, receive a letter from their provider or receive results in their personal health journal packets.

Access: Over 90% of patients surveyed say they were seen within 20 minutes of their appointment time.

None of these improvements happened by accident. They are part of a carefully orchestrated strategy to ensure the quality of care is consistent across our health care system. VAPAHCS employees should be proud of the great customer service we provide. Veteran feedback shows they notice, with overall satisfaction rates exceeding our “exceptional” performance measure goals for Inpatient and Ambulatory Care. Congratulations to all the staff who work so diligently every day to improve our performance in these areas.

High levels of employee satisfaction go hand-in-hand with providing high quality patient care. While we are still reviewing the recently received results of the FY 2004 VHA employee satisfaction survey, all indications are that the satisfaction levels for VAPAHCS employees exceed the VHA national mean score in every dimension. Furthermore, our employee satisfaction levels are the highest in VISN 21 in most dimensions as well. Over 40% of our employees participated in this survey. I am especially pleased with the high scores employees gave regarding their satisfaction with their coworkers, the quality of the work they produce and the type of work they perform. We will provide a detailed analysis of the results on vapaweb in the coming weeks.

I hope all of you enjoy the JCAHO celebrations that will be taking place this month. I very much appreciate your efforts during that very successful survey but more importantly, what you do every day.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Elizabeth J. Freeman".

Elizabeth Joyce Freeman
Director

AHEAD II Offers Innovative Plans for Dementia Caregivers

It is often very difficult for in-home caregivers of dementia patients to come to a support group, so social workers **Susan Bass** and **Genevieve Callahan** came up with a way to bring the support group to them. Beginning last May, they started a monthly telephone support group.

The initiative is part of Advances in Home Based Primary Care for End of Life in Advancing Dementia, (AHEAD II), which provides caregiver support to those who care for veterans with advancing dementia and to let them know they are not alone in their effort to care for those with this illness.

Wives tell Callahan that, “the heartache never really goes away when dealing with the loss of their spouse as a person.” This support group gives them an opportunity to share some of their heartache with others who understand and have had similar experiences.

Additionally, AHEAD II has developed a Dementia Continuity of Care Assessment Tool for VA staff who care for dementia patients. It gives specific information about a patient’s ADL needs, how to best give them their medications, what their sleep patterns are, triggers for difficult behaviors and how to tell when the dementia patient is in pain and what usually helps relieve that pain.

The goal is to complete this tool on all veterans who are seen in geriatric clinic or are enrolled in HBPC. Then, when those veterans are hospitalized, staff will have up-to-date information on how to best take care of them. If a patient with dementia has the “Dementia Continuity of Care” assessment completed it can be easily accessed in the electronic medical record (GUI/CPRS) by clicking on the posting section in the right upper corner of the cover sheet. This is the same place where advance directive information is posted.

Decon Team Trains with New Equipment

It’s not the X Files. In fact, they are VAPAHCS employees who are equipped and trained to perform Level C decon in the event of a biological, chemical or nuclear emergency.

Two years ago, 25 staff trained and were certified Hazardous Materials Technicians. The team had only minimal amounts of decon equipment until recently when VA headquarters bought new equipment for VAPAHCS. Equipment included Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), respirators and a tent (20' x 14' x 8' tall) that allows for fresh water decon of contaminated personnel.

Recently, Decon Team members conducted extensive training with their new equipment, learning to carefully put on suits, PPE respirators, hoods, gloves and boots. Every part of the body must be covered and protected from contamination. All tent seams, even zipper seams, were sealed with duct tape.

Then the water was turned on. Built-in plumbing automatically sprays a warm water/soap mix, followed by a rinse, as people walk through. Operating at full speed, with 12 staff inside the tent, up to 50 people per hour could be decontaminated. The decon tent has three lanes, with privacy curtains: one for males, one for



Above (L to R): Daniel Smith, EMS, Rickey Rivers, Podiatry, Rae Denison, A&MMS, and Dennis Schwartz, OWCP try on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Left, Daniel Smith and Rickey Rivers construct the decontamination tent.

females, and a center lane with a conveyor belt for non-ambulatory patients.

The VA Decon team lost some members over the past two years and is interested in getting the team roster back to 25. If interested, contact Rae Denison, emergency coordinator, at ext. 65554 or Don Gintel, ext. 64436.

Former Chief of Staff Donates Land in La Honda

Dr. Frances Conley, former chief of staff at the VAPAHCS and professor of neurosurgery at the Stanford University School of Medicine, recently donated 191 acres of wooded land in the Santa Cruz Mountains in La Honda. The land, worth \$1.35 million, was given to the Peninsula Open Space Trust for a conservation easement and to prevent any development on the land - forever.

"This is a gorgeous piece of land, a beautiful redwood forest," Conley said in a written statement. "My folks adored the land and wanted it to remain in its natural, pristine condition. That was really important to them."

Born in Palo Alto, Dr. Conley was the chief of neurosurgery at VAPAHCS from 1975 until 1998, when she became chief of staff. She retired in 2000. Her book, *Walking Out on the Boys*, is an account of her struggles to survive at Stanford and become the first tenured female professor of neurosurgery.



Dr. Frances Conley

Palo Alto Doctor Tears Up Green Card



Dr. Stephen Ezeji-Okoye with his hand raised at the swearing in ceremony in San Francisco.

He was born in England and grew up in England, Nigeria and Canada. But just a few weeks ago, Dr. Stephen Ezeji-Okoye, chief of ambulatory care, raised his right hand and swore allegiance to the United States.

He came to America in 1981 to attend Harvard University and then went on to the University of Texas at Houston for medical school and Stanford for residency. "I felt more at home in the US than in any country I had lived or visited," said Dr. Ezeji-Okoye. "In part this is because the freedoms and opportunity afforded to an individual are greater and more unfettered than anywhere else. But it is also because the diversity of the country allowed me to feel as though I fit in."

Dr. Ezeji-Okoye began the process of citizenship in 1995, but found it difficult to find the legal advice he needed to help him through the arduous process, including a five-year wait while on a green card. "If I can give one piece of advice to someone working toward becoming an American citizen, it would be to make sure they interview prospective lawyers carefully and to get a sense of the lawyer's familiarity and success with similar cases to their own."

Note: Lisa Freeman, director, would like to begin recognizing VAPAHCS employees who get their citizenship. She understands that the process is demanding and intense and that accomplishing this goal deserves the highest regard. Please notify Kerri Childress at 64888 if you or someone you know has recently received citizenship or will in the near future.



EMPLOYEE NEWS

New Employees

Anesthesiology Svc.
John C. Aguilon

Human Resources Mgmt.
Timothy Brooks
Liberty Mateo
Kristin Shinoda

IRMS
Anthony Wallace

Medical Svc.
Vivian W. Chan
David Su
Michael Pham
Scott Wasserman
Eugene Yang

Surgical Svc.
David Yang

Nursing Svc.
Cecilia Dimagmaliw
Pamela Fullen
Lindsey Keegan
Dung Le
Vivien Lee
Lisa Monsada
Glenda Navarro
Daniel Shinn
Kristin Tran
Mary Ann Varner

Nutrition & Food Svc.
Pamula Garner
Shellie J. Scott
Michael Singleton
Franklin Williams
Joseph Williams

Path. & Lab. Svc.
Efren M. Bautis
Delfin A. Tatad

PERC
Eric Mankowski

Pharmacy Svc.
Sheetal Patel
Kristin To

Research Svc.
Sharon Abas
Rachel I. Billow
Amy Fiene
Kathy Z. Fung
Robert Hastings
Susan Macus
Deborah K. Page
Scott Rusinstein
Meghan Saweikis
Galin Shamayeva

Social Work Svc.
N'Soroma James

Retirees

Vickie Blackburn (24)
Medical Svc.

Maria Civello (24)
Nursing Svc.

Vickii Ellis (30)
Nursing Svc.

Ester Gomiz (11)
Engineering Svc.

Joseph Lashway (25)
Engineering Svc.

William Morris (35)
Engineering Svc.

Nancy Samuelson (18)
Nutrition & Food Svc.

Gerald Severin (7)
Dermatology Svc.

(Years of service are indicated in parentheses.)

Employee Service Awards

10 Years

Virginia Brehm
Nursing Svc.

Velda Dawudi
Nursing Svc.

Luzviminda De Leon
Nursing Svc.

Maria Doromal
Nursing Svc.

Norman Gross
Medical Svc.

Noelle Hasson
Pharmacy Svc.

Gregory Huffman
IRMS

Samina Iqbal
Medical Svc.

Ronald Koch
Surgical Svc.

Pernell Lagade
Business Office

Kathy Lawrence
Nursing Svc.

Alberto Lopez
Rehab. Medicine Svc.

Judith Lopez
Chief of Staff

Reina Natividad
Nursing Svc.

Lars Osterberg
Medical Svc.

Albert Ritchon
A&MMS

Renato Salindong
Nursing Svc.

Lourie Smith
Nursing Svc.

Alisa Springer
Nursing Svc.

Susan Swetter
Dermatology Svc.

15 Years

Mireya Cordova
Nursing Svc.

Adrean Griffie
Environmental
Mgmt. Svc.

May Mei Law-Ng
IRMS

Keh-Liang Liu
Nursing Svc.

Pia Marloff
Nursing Svc.

Giang Nguyen
Nursing Svc.

Alejandria Padilla
Nursing Svc.

Celia Ramos
Nursing Svc.

Teresa Rondaris
Nursing Svc.

Dora Singletary
Nursing Svc.

Delcenia Slade
Nursing Svc.

Norma Trance
Nursing Svc.

Heidrun Utz
Pharmacy Svc.

Harriet Zeiner
Psychology Svc.

20 Years

Clarence Baptista
Voluntary Svc.

Mei-Kuen Cheng
Nursing Svc.

Rochelle Gray
Pharmacy Svc.

Rose Hurlbert
Nursing Svc.

Matilde Nino-Murcia
Radiology Svc.

Kamala Shankar
Rehab. Medicine Svc.

Renate Welch
Psychology Svc.

25 Years

Israel Ammi
Environmental
Mgmt. Svc.

Walter Avery
Engineering Svc.

Richard Crowe
A&MMS

Lunester Harley
Nursing Svc.

Norma Kubosh
Nursing Svc.

Lori Peery
Chief of Staff

David Stowell
Nursing Svc.

30 years

Mary Cox
Pathology & Lab Svc.

Palo Alto Nurse Practitioner Volunteers Services in Ghana

Veering from the well-worn tourist path, VAPAHCS' nurse practitioner Bonnie Anderson recently embarked on a journey of hope and goodwill to a small fishing village in Ghana on the west coast of Africa.

For two weeks in March, Anderson shared her health care skills at a walk-in clinic in Prampram, located near the capital city of Accra. This was a return trip for her, as she volunteered last year, too.

"I was certain I would return to Ghana," said Anderson. "I was overwhelmed by the love and warmth we received from everyone. I gained a lot of information about local health practices, medications and supplies.

"It takes time to understand how developing countries operate and why they seem not to progress. But through conversations, one begins to realize that people are very tough and resilient. They make do. And that there are



many ways to approach a problem. I tried to understand how my knowledge could integrate with their wishes, needs and supplies.

Founded in 1984, Global Volunteers' goal is to build bridges of understanding and respect between people of diverse cultures. At the invitation of local host organizations, Global sends teams of volunteers to sites worldwide to work on projects ranging from teaching English to assisting with health care to constructing community buildings.

Anderson believes this type of "people to people" diplomacy is the best teacher. "Only by trying to understand each other will the world work towards peace," she said.

Bonnie Anderson, nurse practitioner, travels to Ghana on the west coast of Africa to provide health care at a walk-in clinic. "It was an eye-opening experience in many ways," she said.



Maintenance Team Builds Top-Notch Grill

A barbecue grill might seem like a small thing, but not when you see the new super grill recently christened at Family Day in Menlo Park at the nursing home.

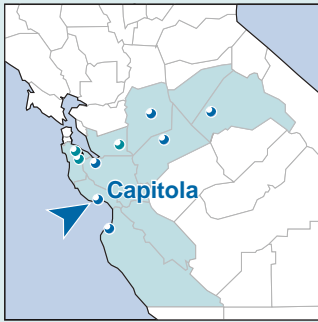
"It was a group effort from the beginning," said Jim Brady, maintenance supervisor at Menlo Park. "We had volunteers who helped tear down the old brick, coal-burning grill. Then recreation staff and residents of the nursing home pitched in to help build the new one. And it was built within budget."

Some of the maintenance crew even came in on weekends to get it done on time. They started in May, and by June 26 the grill was steaming with hot dogs, burgers, beans and other delectable foods for veterans and their families.

Top, (L to R) Jim Brady, Al Henderson, Dave Rauen, Gerald Goodall, Carly Koprek stand before the new barbeque grill.

At right, Sausha Polentz pitches in with Dave Rauen and others to construct the grill.





VA Capitola Health Care A Little Clinic with a Lot of Heart



The Capitola Clinic is VAPAHCS's smallest facility – just two nurses, two exam rooms and one doctor who sees patients on Wednesdays. Yet, the clinic's impact is felt by veterans throughout the

"We are still small and share our waiting room with the Vet Center," said Linda McConnell, RN, who has been with the clinic since it opened. "But our veterans are older, many of them WW II, so they appreciate that they don't have to travel to Monterey or Palo Alto for their primary care. Both Donna and I are daughters of veterans, so we have a deep appreciation for what these men and women did for our country."

And the veterans appreciate Barr, McConnell and Dr. Norman Goss, too. "They are great – I have nothing but compliments for the care I get here," said retired Air Force veteran Charles Toshikin. "Not only is the health care good, but they make me feel comfortable – like family."

area, 900 of whom come to the Capitola clinic for their health care.

"We like to think of ourselves kind of like an old-fashioned doctor's office," said Donna Barr, RNP. "We are small enough to know all our patients: we know their military background, we know where they live, we know the names of their grandchildren. It makes a big difference."

The clinic is co-located with the Santa Cruz County Vet Center, which works out well for veterans who may need some mental health counseling and for those who come seeking counseling and need clinical health care. Although the clinic does not offer labs, X-rays or specialty care, it has come a long way since it opened in 1997 when it was just a one-day-a-week screening clinic.



Donna Barr, RNP, and Linda McConnell, RN, have worked at the Capitola Clinic almost since its inception.

Women's Equality Day

On August 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote was certified as part of the U.S. Constitution; referred to as the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, it states, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on the account of sex."

Come join the Federal Women's Program to celebrate Women's Equal-

ity Day on August 24th, Building 334, room C200, Menlo Park Division and on August 26th, Building 101, Auditorium, Palo Alto Division. We are proud to announce that Darrah Westrup, PhD, Director of the Outpatient Women's Mental Health Center and Clinical Psychologist for the Women's Trauma Recovery Program, Menlo Park Division, will be the guest speaker.

VAPAHCS Celebrates July 4th in Style



Monterey Clinic (left)

Charlotte (Mike) Flynn, staff assistant to the chief of staff, horses around with Joe Rodriguez while he cooks up a batch of hamburgers and hot dogs during the Monterey Clinic's annual 4th of July Barbecue. The celebration is hosted each year by the E-9 Association. "They are a great group of guys," said Flynn. "Don't know what we'd do without them."



Menlo Park Division (above)

Coordinated by recreation therapists Alisa Krinsky, Eric Young, Shawna Hill and Marge Jergentz-Stout, the annual Menlo Park 4th of July celebrations included a live country band, belly dancers and more than 15 booths offering games and special activities.

"It took a lot of effort by staff and especially the volunteers from the veteran service organizations," said Beth Hardison. "But what a success. More than 200 veterans attended."

Palo Alto Division (below)



Employees joined more than 150 veterans to listen to the Air National Guard Band of the West, which played not only patriotic music, but jazz, oldies and big band. The band set up just outside the canteen, and everyone agreed, the acoustics were great. Coordinated by Jerry Duncan, recreation therapist at the Blind Rehab Center, the music was followed by an ice cream social. This was the first year for the Air National Guard Band, but it surely will not be the last. "The music is really fine," said one veteran. "I would say pretty great myself," said another.



Whistle Stop Commemorates a Decade of Service



Susan Swetter, chief of Dermatology, plays with her daughter as Whistle Stop teacher Julie Perry watches.

The Whistle Stop Child Development Center is celebrating its 10th Anniversary with a grand reunion on Aug. 22.

The Center has served over 500 children whose parents work at VA, as well as children from the local community. The party will be held at the Whistle Stop at the VA Hospital in Palo Alto.

Current students, alumni and their families, current and former teachers, and present and past Board Members are invited to participate.

Following a program and potluck lunch, guests can enjoy games, music, a self-guided tour of the Center, bouncy tents, a baby-safe area and an opportunity to reconnect with friends.

We hope to see you soon!

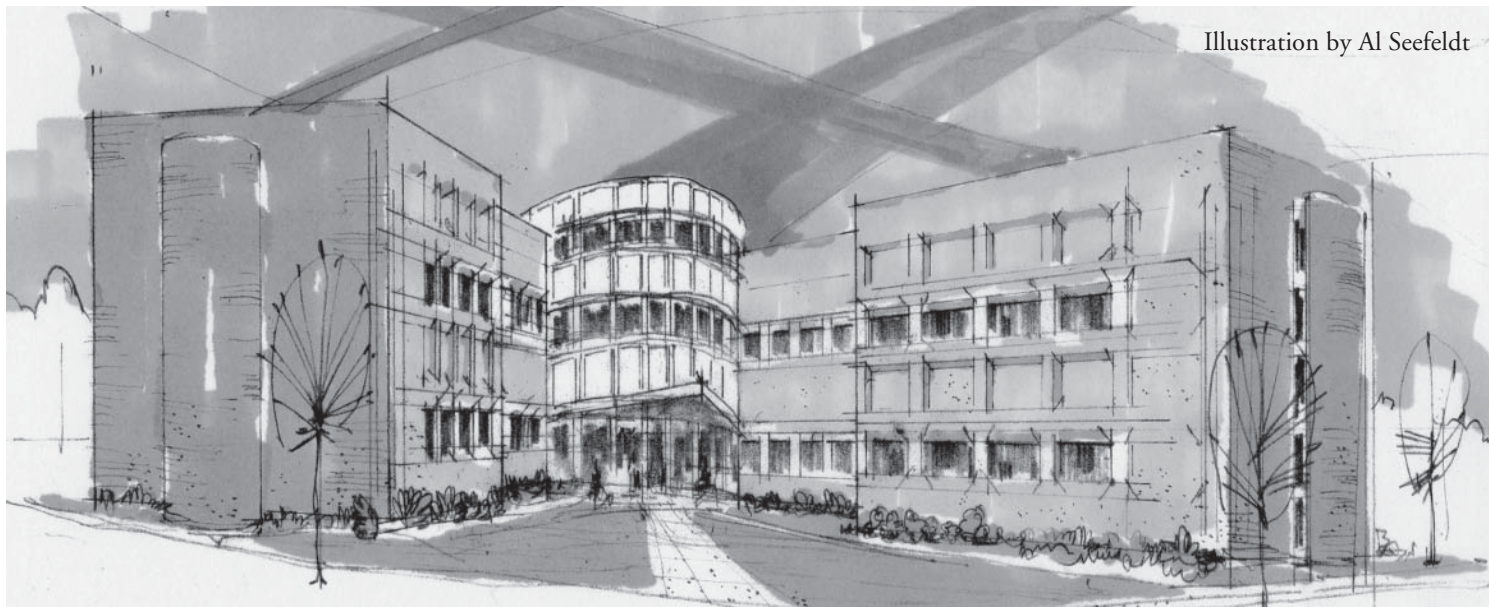


Illustration by Al Seefeldt

New Psych Building Right Around the Corner

Moving quickly on its new, multi-year, multi-billion-dollar facilities program called CARES, VA headquarters has drawn up an ambitious 2004 blueprint that includes building an 80-bed acute psychiatric replacement facility at the Palo Alto Campus. Based on VA Central Office's major construction prioritization, Palo Alto was the highest priority for fiscal year 2004.

"Simply said, this is great!" said Jason Nietupski, VAPAHCS facility planner. "Not only will we be able to consolidate four geographically separate acute psychiatric inpatient wards into a single, state-of-the-art treatment facility, we will also be able to expand our parking capabilities when the old Building 2 is razed."

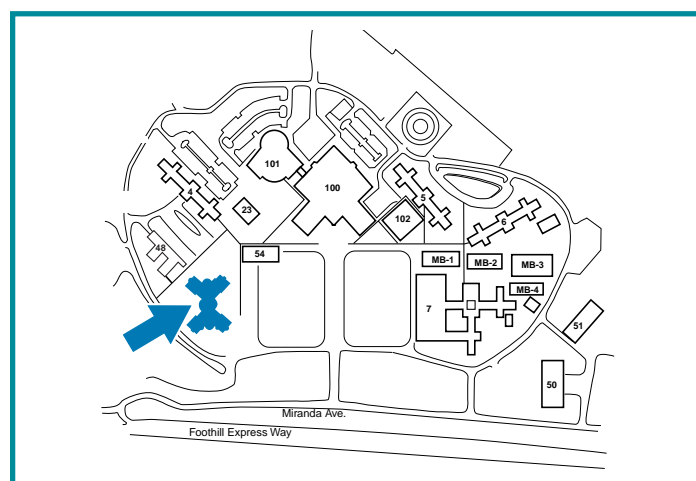
Today, VAPAHCS operates 92 acute inpatient psychiatric beds located throughout the Palo Alto and Menlo Park Divisions. Given the lack of acute psychiatric inpatient facilities in the local community, maintaining adequate capacity to treat veterans who are seriously and chronically mentally ill remains a top priority.

Safety is another big consideration, and Building 2 has been deemed obsolete, functionally deficient and seismically unsafe. "To renovate would have been more expensive than the anticipated \$34 million for the new building, and the results would not enhance the actual environment of care. Additionally, we have nowhere to relocate these veterans while renovations are ongoing," said Nietupski. Bases on these issues, Central Office concurred with the decision to replace Building 2 with a world-class psychiatric hospital.

VAPAHCS is VISN 21's primary referral site for veterans who suffer from serious and chronic mental illnesses like chronic schizophre-

nia, bi-polar disease and other psychoses. In fiscal year 2002, VAPAHCS provided 78 percent of VISN 21's psychiatric inpatient treatments, which equates to nearly 37,500 bed days of care.

"We plan to have complete design development by November of this year, award the construction contract in August 2005, and have a topnotch facility built and ready for veterans by 2008," said Nietupski. "I'm very excited. This will be a huge improvement for our clinicians, and most importantly the men and women we proudly serve."



Top, rendering of the new psychiatric building. Above, Palo Alto campus map showing location of the new building (arrow).

You Make a Difference!

Submitted by our veterans and their families.

"Last week, I played 18 holes of golf. I walked the course and carried my bag and clubs. I enjoyed it so much I repeated the deal again this week. In the cosmic scheme of things this is no big deal. I am confident the activity was unnoticed by the Hubble telescope. BUT it was important to me and I write to thank you, **Dr. Burdon**, for fixing my heart so I could undertake same."

— A Veteran



"I am writing this letter to praise the great work of the VA in Palo Alto. I am an ex-Marine and a Vietnam Veteran. I am also a family physician who is medically retired. I have many medical problems, some of which are related to "Agent Orange." Every physician and nurse has addressed each condition with the greatest professionalism and skill. There is one person who particularly stands out. She is **Laura O'Bannon**, a nurse practitioner/coordinator in the cardiology department. She is remarkable, thorough, knowledgeable, caring and dependable. Like Marines, all the employees expect themselves to be the best, but now and then one rises above all expectations to deserves a medal. That person would be Ms. O'Bannon."

— A Veteran

"God bless **Mr. Prisco** and may he continue the great job that he is doing. He listens to us and tries to help us right then and there."

— A Veteran from 2B2

"It has been my good fortune to have **Mr. Roosevelt Keyes**, nurse assistant, care for me on many occasions in the **Spinal Cord Unit of the VA Hospital in Palo Alto**. It has been my experience that his conduct has been professional and skilled in caring for myself and other patients and his demeanor has been compassionate and above reproach towards myself, my family and friends, and the medical staff."

— A Veteran

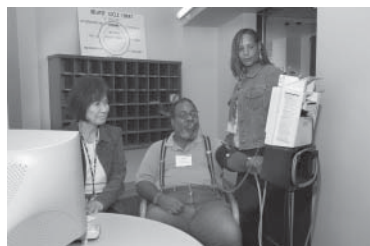


"Recently I was selected to receive an E-Motion Power Assist wheelchair. After 40 years in a manual wheelchair my shoulders were extremely happy, which is an understatement. The man primarily responsible for this is **Dr. Douglas Ota**. It was through his untiring efforts that I now have a new lease on an independent lifestyle."

— A Veteran

"As residents of VA's new program called **Foundation of Recovery – Sobriety**, we wanted to take this opportunity to show our gratitude for your 30-day program. This is a very important and vital program VA has made available to us. The time-frame gives us a chance to gather some 'tools' besides just going through detox. The staff and facility have all been 'Blue-Ribbon' and possibly even life-saving for some of us. We pray for continuance and growth of this program."

— 12 Veterans



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Submissions should be received by
the 1st working day of the month to
be included in upcoming issues.
Due to space limitations, it is not
possible to publish all submissions.

We welcome any comments,
suggestions or story ideas
you may have; please contact
Kerri Childress (00K) at
ext. 64888 or directly at
650-858-3925.

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